

Communicating with Families about Vaccines

Effective, empathetic communication is critical in responding to families who are considering not vaccinating themselves or their children. Adults should be helped to feel comfortable voicing any concerns or questions they have about vaccination, and practitioners should be prepared to listen and respond effectively.

Ask questions

Evaluate whether the patient has had a valid contraindication to a vaccine by asking about medical history, allergies, and previous experiences.

- Assess the reasons for wanting to delay or forgo vaccination in a non-confrontational manner. (Have they had a bad experience? Obtained troubling information? Do they have religious or philosophical reservations?)
- If caregivers or adults have safety concerns or misconceptions about vaccination ask them to identify the source(s) of those concerns or beliefs.
- Listen carefully, paraphrase to the adult what they have told you, and ask them if you have correctly interpreted what they have said.

Respect & address concerns

- Provide factual information in language that is easily understood, addressing the specific concerns or misconceptions the adult or caregiver has about vaccination.
- Use Vaccine Information Statements (VIS) for discussing vaccine benefits and risks. Before administering each dose of certain vaccines, practitioners and providers are required by law to give a copy of the current VIS to the child's parent/legal guardian. Providers must also record in the child's chart the date that the VIS was given and the publication date of the VIS. (SEE AIM Kit).
- Educate families about the dangers of vaccine-preventable diseases and the risks of not vaccinating as they relate to the child, adult, family, and community.
- Express your personal support for vaccinations and share experiences you have had with patients with vaccine-preventable diseases.
- Provide educational materials to be taken home and refer the adult to other credible sources of information (SEE AIM kit).

Educate about responsibilities

- Inform adults and caregivers who defer vaccination of their responsibilities to protect other family and community members, including people who may be immunocompromised (*i.e., keeping sick children at home and other ways to limit the spread of infection*).
- Parents also should be advised of state school or child-care entry laws, which might require that unimmunized children stay home from school during outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases.

Explore acceptable options

- Explore whether the patient or parent is willing to allow themselves or their children to receive certain vaccines, to be immunized on an alternative schedule, or delay vaccination and "catch-up" if they change their mind.

Keep communication open

- Keep the lines of communication open with adults who choose to defer or who refuse vaccination by expressing your desire to talk more about vaccines during future visits.
- Periodically assess the adult's or parent's willingness to vaccinate, including at every well visit. Document any refusal to vaccinate in the medical record.